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C.I.A. Reportedly Recruited Blacks For Surveillance of Panther Party

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The Central Intelligence Agency recruited American blacks in the late 1960's and early 1970's to spy on members of the Black Panther Party both in the United States and in Africa, according to former high-level officials of the agency who have first-hand knowledge of the operations.

Details of these clandestine activities were considered among the agency's most sensitive and closely-held information, the sources said, partly because of fears that disclosures about the program would arouse public accusations of racism in the intelligence agency.

Only in the most oblique references did any of the inquiries in recent years into C.I.A. activities ever uncover the program of black spying.

At least some specific information about the C.I.A.'s spying was provided to the 1975 Rockefeller Commission and later to the Senate intelligence committee in their inquiries into illegal C.I.A. activities, but those investigating groups did not include any specific mention of the recruitment and use of American blacks in their subsequent public reports.

The activities of the black agents ranged from the following and photographing of suspected Black Panther Party members in the United States to the infiltration of Panther groups in Africa. One agent managed to gain access to the personal overseas living quarters of Eldridge Cleaver, the Panther leader who set up a headquarters in Algeria in the late 1960's.

In its final report, the Rockefeller Commission, a panel appointed by President Ford to investigate charges of C.I.A. abuses, concluded that the agency's spying in this country exceeded its authority. The overseas efforts to link the Black Panther operations to foreign influence theoretically was proper, the commission said, although much of the material in the C.I.A.'s files "was not directly related to the question of the existence of foreign connections."

The Rockefeller Commission subse-

quently recommended that the C.I.A. be directed not to perform "what are essentially internal security tasks," in the United States or elsewhere.

The Senate intelligence committee, which will soon begin public hearings into the proposed new charter for the intelligence community, has recommended that the C.I.A. be compelled to obtain a warrant before conducting any wiretaps or surveillance of American citizens living abroad.

C.I.A. officials have said repeatedly that the goal of the agency's domestic spying program was to determine whether anti-war activists and black extremists were being financed and directed by Communist governments. Agency officials have declined to discuss the programs further.

One longtime C.I.A. operative with direct knowledge of the spying said, however, that there was an additional goal in the case of the Black Panthers living abroad: to "neutralize" them; "to try and get them in trouble with local authorities wherever they could." Just how successful the C.I.A. was in those alleged activities could not be determined.

In his memoirs, "Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA," some of whose details were published Tuesday in The New York Times, William E. Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence, acknowledges that he was unable to learn all there was to know about the C.I.A.'s domestic spying operations.

One man who had first-hand knowledge of the operation said, "If they had gotten exposed, then it would have been the C.I.A. versus the Black Panthers and all black Americans—they've had a lot of Americans against them. The agency would have been exposed, open to attack."

"For all my efforts," Mr. Colby wrote, "I found it impossible to do much about righting whatever was wrong" with the domestic spying programs. "Its supersecrecy and extreme compartmentation," he added, "kept me very much on its periphery."

In his memoir, Mr. Colby did not mention the spying by blacks on the Black Panther Party.

In interviews over the last two months, former staff investigators for the Rockefeller commission and the Senate committee were asked why their final reports did not discuss the use of black Americans. The former staff members disagreed widely over who had been told what—inevitably raising questions about the effectiveness and thoroughness of the investigations.

Some former high-level officials of the C.I.A. acknowledged that black Americans had been used in Africa and elsewhere to spy on the Black Panthers. Full details of those activities, they said, were not disclosed to the Senate committee or the Rockefeller Commission.

Some Data Acknowledged

In interviews, a few members of both panels acknowledged that they had received some information about the C.I.A.'s spying on blacks. Most staff members, however, firmly denied that there had been such spying.

"If that's the case, I'm astonished," one investigator for the Rockefeller Commission said when informed of the use of American blacks. "If it were so, it's something I didn't know about and I'd have to say I'd feel I'd been deceived."

A Senator who took a leading role in the committee's C.I.A. investigation also said he knew of the use of blacks domestically. But he said, "I think you're pretty accurate in saying that we were not told of the use of American-blacks overseas. I never heard anything."

A former high-level C.I.A. official who was directly involved in the Senate investigation said he was not surprised to learn that some senior Senate officials did not know of the use of black agents.

'An Adversary Proceeding'

"They didn't ask," the former C.I.A. official said. "We treated the Senate inquiry as an adversary proceeding. It wasn't a show and tell program. Had they asked, we would have dug out the answers."

"There must be a dozen comparable situations going on," he said. "The fact is, no one asked."

"I think it's important for the public to understand that this was an adversary proceeding," he said. "It was up to the committee to ask. They were running the investigation."

"And that's why the Hill is such a poor place to resolve these issues. The Senate intelligence committee was very divided. Its chairman [Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho] was running for President and the minority and majority staffs were divided and playing games."

Two Major Programs

The Times's sources said that the C.I.A. conducted at least two major programs involving the use of American blacks when the Panthers, organized by young blacks in the mid-'60s, were publicly advocating revolutionary change.

One program, run by the C.I.A. Office of Security, was operated in the Washington area and code-named Merrimac.

Internal C.I.A. documents supplied to the Times show that black agents attended rallies and other public occasions, such as funerals, in hopes of identifying members of the Black Panther Party.

The agents took photographs of suspected party members and also filed numerous memorandums on automobiles believed to belong to party members.

In its report, the Rockefeller Commission said that the program, which it said had no more than 12 agents assigned to it, had exceeded the C.I.A.'s authority by "photographing people, activities and cars, and following people home." But the report did not say that black agents had been recruited for the mission.

Domestic Files Destroyed

Similarly, a commission investigator acknowledged, the report did not mention that between 150 and 200 C.I.A. domestic files on black dissidents had been destroyed before the commission's inquiry. All of the files included photographs.

The destruction of the files, which first became known more than two years ago, was not considered to be a deliberate attempt to destroy evidence, a commission official said.

The C.I.A. documents supplied to the Times also raise questions about the motivation for the agency's activities against the Black Panthers and other black dissidents.

A Dec. 11, 1967, memorandum by Howard J. Osborne, director of the Office of Security, said that many black dissidents, among them Mr. Cleaver, had sought to make the C.I.A. a public "scapegoat" and were claiming that the agency had been involved in, among other things, the 1961 "assassination" of Patrice Lumumba, the Congo leader.

A subsequent report on C.I.A. assassination attempts filed by the Senate intelligence committee showed that Mr. Lumumba had indeed been a repeated target of C.I.A. assassination efforts, which may not have been known to Mr. Osborne when he wrote his 1967 memorandum.

Cited Series of Files

In another document, dated Sept. 12, 1975—months after the Rockefeller Commission issued its report—Mr. Osborne noted that his office kept a series of files and memorandums "under the caption of Alleged Illegal Domestic Activities."

"The above memoranda may or may not have been furnished in toto to the Rockefeller Commission," he said.

The second major C.I.A. spying program that used black Americans was centered in North and East Africa and revolved around a small number of carefully recruited agents who were sent to Algeria, Kenya and Tanzania, among other places, to keep close watch on American black radicals.

A key to the operation, a first-hand source said, was Eldridge Cleaver's decision, after he was ordered to face charge of parole violation, to leave the United States in 1969 and move to Algeria. In 1970, the Black Panther Party formally opened an international headquarters, headed by Mr. Cleaver, in Algiers.

Visits to Foreign Capitals

While in Africa, Mr. Cleaver and his colleagues visited Peking, Hanoi and Pyongyang, North Korea, and visited with Palestinian guerrilla leaders.

But despite years of intense spying, the source said, the agents overseas were unable to develop any information linking Mr. Cleaver and other American black radicals to a foreign government.

As many as six American blacks were recruited as temporary contract employees by the C.I.A. and sent under cover to operate against the Black Panthers and other black dissidents visiting Africa, the source said. One American emerged as the operator of a small hotel in North Africa that catered to black dissidents, the source said, with the hotel's annual deficit subsidized by the C.I.A. Another posed as a poet and journalist who mingled with American radicals.

"This was the kind of operation where you just don't go out and recruit by the shotgun approach," the source said. "If you recruit 12 men, three of them might be insecure—they could compromise the operation and give it away."

One of the C.I.A. operatives later boasted to his colleagues, the Times's source said, that he had managed to penetrate the Algerian headquarters of Mr. Cleaver "and sat at the table" with him.

All of the C.I.A. men involved were aware that the operation was, as a former agency official said, "dicey" in terms of the C.I.A.'s statutory prohibition against conducting internal security investigations.

"If an American happens to live in Nairobi, the C.I.A. does not have a charter to bug his home and to track him down," said a man who had first-hand knowledge of the operation. "There's no charter giving it the power to investigate Americans—even if they live in Africa. It's supposed to turn over any information it ran across to the F.B.I."

The C.I.A. set up a special office for the black program in the basement of its headquarters in McLean, Va., the source said, and the operations were linked—either directly or indirectly—with the agency's extensive CHAOS program, the six-year operation set up by C.I.A. Director Richard Helms to monitor American dissidents in the United States.

An Agent's Transfer

Security was so extensive that at one point the C.I.A. decided to transfer a black operative who was working in the agency's station in the United States Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya. "There was too much chance that the officer, in a small office like the one in Kenya, would run across the traffic dealing with the operations against the Black Panthers," the Times's source said. "If he found out," the source added, "he'd have gone crazy."

"We dummed up some excuse that he was needed somewhere else and he got transferred."

A senior C.I.A. official said the failure of the agency to reveal the use of American blacks "doesn't bother me at all."

"You wouldn't send a Chinese over there to find out what happened, would you?" he asked, rhetorically.

A senior official of the Senate intelligence committee acknowledged that he and others did not know of the use of American blacks in the C.I.A.'s overseas spying program.

"But the essential point," he added, "is not whether we received information about a specific program or not, but did we receive enough generic information to be able to write permanent legislation to guarantee the rights of Americans at home and abroad."

In that regard, he said, the committee did successfully complete its work.